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Promoting Democracy – Trends, Policies and Challenges

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Introduction

The increasingly important role many democracies assign to democracy promotion as both a strategic goal and a central activity area of their foreign policies deserves attention in the overall discussion about the qualities of democracy and the directions of democratic development. This is so for a number of reasons.

First, the working definitions that underpin international democracy promotion efforts are informed by other, broader discussions on the quality of the democratic process in established democratic states and about the pace and nature of democratization in countries with previously authoritarian regimes. This multifaceted democracy and democratization discourse includes the heated debates regarding the accuracy and relevance of the diverse methodologies for the measurement and assessment of democracy and democratization, and those related to the crucial, yet somewhat nebulous, dividing line between *democratic breakthroughs* and *democratic consolidation* – both of these areas are of paramount importance for practitioners of international democracy promotion.

Second, democracy promotion efforts, whether they are conducted by states or by international organizations, do exercise a degree of influence over the directions of domestic democratization processes in the countries they are targeting. The exact nature, extent, and forms of this influence, however, are yet to be defined and elaborated on, not least because of the relatively recent and so far rather limited academic attention these external factors in domestic democratization have received. There are considerable benefits to devoting more systematic attention to the influence of external democracy promotion efforts on domestic processes that lead to *democratic breakthroughs* in consolidated or semi-consolidated autocracies and on *democratic consolidations* that lead to qualitative improvements in democratic governance in already existing electoral democracies. This is

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especially important given the speedy proliferation of agents active in the democracy promotion business and the commensurate increase in funds devoted to this goal, not only by states but by a plethora of international, inter-governmental, and private bodies around the world.

And finally, only by critically assessing the current infrastructure and working methods of international democracy promotion can we hope to improve and optimize its performance and ensure that it indeed contributes positively to the highly diverse and often idiosyncratic indigenous democratization efforts and to improvements in the quality of democracy in countries at the early stages of transition.

This paper sets itself the modest aim to review the recent history and current trends in democracy promotion, including an overview of the definitions and policy frameworks underpinning the democracy promotion strategies of the key players active in this arena, proceeding to enumerate the problems and challenges encountered by both policymakers and practitioners in developing and implementing appropriate donor policies and measuring their impact and rate of success.

A universal value or the imperialism of ideas?

One of the most basic features of the multi-layered discourse on democracy and democratization concerns the definition of democracy and the efforts to construct universally applicable benchmarks for the measurement of its presence and/or quality. In light of recent world events – most saliently symbolized by the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent, if entirely opportunistic, re-justification of the invasion in the terms of democracy promotion – it is not surprising that the debate about whether democracy is a universal value or an inherently history- and culture-bound construct has resurfaced with a vengeance.

Even a cursory glance at the narrowly defined literature of *democracy promotion* reveals a surprising gap between those who view democracy as an "inherently multidimensional concept, [with] little consensus over its attributes,"[1] and those who understand democracy as a "universal value" and claim, with some of their justification rooted more firmly in international policy development and practice than in academic

[1] "Improving Democracy Assistance: Building Knowledge Through Evaluations and Research", Committee on Evaluation of USAID Democracy Assistance Programs, National Research Council, 2008

theorizing, that "there is widespread agreement at the political level, […] about the definition of democracy."[2]

The above divergence on basic definitions appears to be a natural result of the complications that have beset democratization processes around the world and the consequent erosion of previously uncontested assumptions about democracy, both as a means to development and as a desired end-goal in itself. The pro-democracy consensus of the 1990s – informed by the seeming convergence of political developments (the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent democratization in the former communist satellite states and the concurrent expansion of electoral democracy in Latin America and Asia) with sweeping grand theories (above all by Huntington and Fukuyama) pointing to the inevitable emergence of Western-type liberal democracy as the uncontested universal model – has in recent years given way to a lively, and at times ideologically-colored, debate on the usefulness and, indeed, the overall viability of promoting democracy. A corollary to this debate is another one, which concerns primarily the linkage, or lack thereof, between development and democracy in international aid policy, in particular with regards to questions of causal relationships, sequencing, and the primacy of one objective over another.[3]

There is no space here to delve substantially into the various debates, yet it is worth noting that despite the lively discussion, an effective consensus does seem to exist on certain basic democratic practices that are *essential* – although perhaps not sufficient in themselves – to qualify a polity as democratic, at least in the minimal sense of the word. In this reading, democracy is a governance system based on popular sovereignty and collective decisionmaking.[4] Of course, the debate about the *qualities of democracy* centers around precisely on the attributes that are additional to these basic democratic criteria. On the political level, there is also strong convergence toward an extended definition of democracy, which includes respect for fundamental civil liberties and political rights, periodic multiparty elections that are free and fair, universal and equal suffrage, an elected parliament, an

[2] Theodore J. Piccone, "Talking Sense: Guidelines for International Democracy Promotion", in "Democratic Responses to Terrorism", Leonard Weinberg (ed), Routledge, 2007

[3] Vidar Helgesen, „Democracy and Development", in „Challenges to Democracy Building – Recommendations for a New Swedish Policy on Democracy Building", International IDEA, 2008

[4] Todd Landman, „Developing Democracy: Concepts, Measures, and Empirical Relationships", Background paper prepared for the Ministry of Foregin Affairs of Sweden, May 2007, International IDEA, 2007

independent judiciary, a free press, sufficient civilian control of the military, and the rule of law.[5]

It is this *liberal* definition of democracy – i.e. its procedural fundamentals coupled with extended systemic components and their functions in safeguarding political rights and civil liberties, including minority rights – that above all has been serving as the primary fountain of ideas for international democracy promotion efforts in the last 25 years – the period in which democracy promotion/assistance has been elevated to a key foreign policy objective of many a democratic state and of international and inter-governmental organizations.

It can also be reasonably argued – despite the seemingly intensifying conflict between those who advocate for the pro-active promotion of democracy and those who view such activities as, at best, naïve and counterproductive, or, at worst, as ideological imperialism masquerading in the guise of promoting universal values – that today there are no serious *ideological* competitors to democracy as a political system.[6]

This of course does not mean that international democracy promotion and indigenous democratic movements do not face serious pushback from autocrats of all shapes and stripes – yet, with the notable exception of the adherents to the Bin Laden and Taliban-stripe of extreme Islamism, even these autocrats are increasingly claiming some form of dubious democratic legitimacy and more often than not attempt to create a democratic façade to cover the fundamentally undemocratic nature of their polities.

This growing global legitimacy of democracy as a universally preferred political system (even if one empirically recognizes the infinite variations in its internal workings and in its external contours, depending on history, culture and socio-economic factors) is a trend in seeming contradiction with the recent travails and plummeting international stature of that most prominent of democracy's international purveyors, the United States. It is fair to conclude, that democracy promotion has, to a significant degree, become decoupled from the ability of the United States to project its values and democratic model onto other parts of the world.

Indeed, in the last quarter of a century, the United States, once the sole declared "promoter of democracy" in the international sphere, has been joined by other

[5] E.g. UN General Assembly Resolution on Promoting and Consolidating Democracy, 4 December 2000; Warsaw Declaration of the Community of Democracies, 27 June 2000

[6] Fareed Zakaria „The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad", W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2003

democracies, international organizations, and, above all, a supranational entity (the EU), elevating the normative goal of "democracy promotion" to one of the key platforms of foreign policy strategies in many, if not most, developed democracies and their various groupings at the international level. Indeed, it can be argued that today the most active and successful promoter of democracy is not the United States, but, primarily through its enlargement policy, the European Union. (It must be noted here, however, that the limits of the applicability of the 'enlargement paradigm' are currently being tested and it remains to be seen whether its central assumptions about positive conditionality hold up in the absence of an explicit membership promise).

This proliferation of agents and the resulting variety of means and methods to promote democracy is a welcome development as this growing plurality of democratic models and concurrent strategies to promote democracy results in a bigger, more versatile toolbox for democracy promoters to draw upon and, hopefully, a departure from the one-size-fits-all approach of earlier periods.

At this point, it is worth reviewing the recent history of democracy promotion, its gradual and organic formulation as a key foreign policy objective, the growth of the international democracy promotion infrastructure, its track record over the last 25 years and the challenges it currently faces.

Democracy promotion in practice

It is not an easy task to pinpoint the genesis of what today is a truly global, multi-layered, and diverse community of democracy promotion practitioners, supported by national and international bureaucracies and a plethora of private organizations. For the purposes of this paper, I will look more closely at the two main players, as defined by their overall monetary contribution to designated "democracy assistance" programs, in the current democracy promotion field: the US and the European Union. In addition to these two, I will also briefly review the contribution of smaller, but important players, including individual states, intergovernmental and international organizations, and private entities.

US democracy promotion

As a result of its unique history and its emergence as a major power after World War I – led by a president with clear ideas about the creation of a value-based international political architecture rooted in democratic domestic consent ("making the world safer for

democracy") – it is no wonder that the United States is the country most closely associated with the concept of democracy promotion and its practice as a foreign policy objective. Following Wilson's example, especially after World War II, a variety of strategic policy initiatives, such as the Atlantic Charter, the Marshall Plan, the Berlin Airlift and the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, continued building the US tradition of democracy support.

The reasons for this support were rooted both in America's national interest and in ideals closely associated with country's self-image. At the same time, while the general American commitment to democratic values is unquestionable, the effective representation of these values globally and their unequivocal support in specific cases of intervention in third countries has been less than consistent. Like all great powers with a wide-ranging set of interests and an even greater set of geopolitical challenges, the US also often prioritized its own strategic interests at the expense of local democratic movements, sometimes, as in Iran in 1953 and in Chile in 1973, doing so in egregiously cynical fashion. A similar dynamic lay at the roots of US – and, truth to be told, EU – policies aimed at isolating and undermining Hamas after its victory at the polls in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections.

Notwithstanding these individual examples of crudely-defined national interest or geopolitics trumping democratic ideals, there had clearly been a growing trend in US foreign policy to prioritize democracy support, characterized by the increased attention to human rights issues under president Carter and, subsequently under president Reagan, an ever more explicit commitment to democracy promotion and the push for the creation of an institutional framework specifically supporting this goal.

A momentous step in this direction came with the 1983 establishment of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), following Ronald Reagan's Westminster speech in which he called for concerted international efforts to support democratic development and democracy around the world.[7] The creation of the bipartisan NED and its four affiliated non-profit organizations (the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, the Center for International Private Enterprise, and the Solidarity Center) marked the beginning of a new era in which direct, public support was provided to democracy and human rights activists via a designated framework of organizations set apart from the state foreign policy apparatus. The NED model has proven to be quite successful and in recent years many other state donors have considered creating their own democracy support mechanisms in its image (existing examples today include Canada's International

[7] Ronald Reagan's Address to Members of the British Parliament, University of Virginia Miller Center for Public Affairs, Presidential Speech Archive, http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3408

Centre for Human Rights and Development and Britain's Westminster Foundation for Democracy, for example).

In parallel with the emergence of a publicly funded non-governmental institutional framework, the role played by various government agencies in US democracy promotion abroad had also been transformed. President George H.W. Bush further expanded support for democratic development by adding it to the portfolio of USAID. In the Clinton administration, democracy promotion became one of the three pillars of the overall US development strategy. Under George W. Bush, and especially following his 2004 inauguration address, democracy promotion received unprecedented profile in US foreign policy, including a highly ambitious agenda of fostering democratic change in the Middle East.

Today, the US "democracy bureaucracy" is a highly dispersed group of government agencies, multinational bodies, and private organizations.[8] Apart from NED and its affiliated program implementing institutes, other non-profit organizations (such as the Carter Center, the American Bar Associations, or Freedom House) as well as for-profit contractors (such as PACT or Development Associates) also carry out democracy support programs funded through US government grants. The list of US government agencies that are central to democracy promotion programming includes the above-mentioned USAID, the State Department as well as the Department of Defense, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Labor – these latter three implement sectoral programs, while USAID and the State Department are more generalists in their programming.[9]

Under the Bush administration, additional programs and agencies were added to the traditional players, among them the Millennium Challenge Corporation (to disburse foreign aid based on a conditionality principle linked to achievements of benchmarks in political and economic governance reforms in the recipient country) and the Middle East Partnership Initiative (a Presidential initiative, which operates within the State Department and prioritizes grass-roots civil society support, including strong emphasis on women's rights). Some have argued that while the diversity and dispersed nature of the US democracy promotion infrastructure is a positive attribute overall (it enables highly heterogeneous yet complementary programming to be funded, implemented and overseen by a wide variety of

[8] Thomas O. Melia, „The Democracy Bureaucracy", The American Interest, Vol. I., No. 4, Summer 2006
[9] Thomas O. Melia „The Democracy Bureaucracy", op.cit.

institutional actors), there have been increasing concerns about the lack of inter-agency coordination, overlapping competencies, duplication of efforts, and policy incoherence.[10]

Within the confines of this paper, it is impossible to provide a comprehensive overview of US democracy promotion efforts and their impact. It is more reasonable to draft a basic typology of the main types of democracy assistance the US has engaged in, as well as the main assumptions about democracy and democratization underpinning these different types of democracy aid. It has been argued that, in comparison to the European Union, the US has been largely a proponent of providing support to civil society activists who, through their opposition to autocratic rulers, were seen as the key movers of indigenous democratic change.[11] In this reading, the US has been a driver of democratic change in a "bottom-up" fashion.

It seems more accurate, however, to look at US democracy promotion efforts from the mid-1970s (the beginning of the "third-wave" of democratization) as a reaction to the unprecedented and largely unexpected democratic openings from Latin America, to Asia, to Central Europe.[12] US democracy assistance in these regions took a multitude of forms, largely focusing on three distinct aims: to support free and fair elections; to help develop effective political institutions: parties, constitutions, courts, legislatures and local governments; and to promote nongovernmental civic and community groups like fraternal organizations, religiously affiliated associations, rights groups, trade unions, professional societies, and media. This direct democracy aid has often been linked, yet frequently in contradiction, with diplomatic, economic, or even military tools and measures.

In his seminal book on democracy promotion, *Aiding Democracy Abroad – The Learning Curve,* Thomas Carothers effectively outlined the implicit sequential model of democratization that essentially guided the US democracy promotion agenda over the last quarter of a century. Democratization was posited as a sequential process, beginning with a degree of political opening, which allows the rise of opposition and civic groups that, in turn, demand representation, that is elections. Following the elections, the process of democratic consolidation begins, which is propelled forward by both "top-down" (institution building)

[10] Matthew Spence, „The Domestic Politics of American Democracy Promotion", Workshop on Democracy Promotion, Center for Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, Stanford University, October 4-5, 2004
[11] Jeffrey Kopstein, "The Transatlantic Divide over Democracy Promotion", The Washington Quarterly, 29:2, Spring 2006
[12] Thomas Carothers, „Aiding Democracy Abroad – The Learning Curve", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, 1999

and "bottom-up" (strengthening civil society) forces. Hence the threefold focus of democracy aid: elections, institutions, and, finally, civil society.

Between the mid-80s and the early 90s, US democracy assistance focused on supporting free and fair elections that followed the initial democratic openings in Latin America, Asia, and Central Eastern Europe. This was followed by a period when support was concentrated on building and strengthening democratic institutions, including parties, legislatures, and judiciaries. But while US democracy assistance did in fact encompass all three of these areas, in the last decade and a half attention has shifted decisively towards civil society support. The main testing ground for civil society support in US democracy promotion efforts was Central Eastern Europe, where the US had supported civil society activists even before the major political openings took place. The lessons from this successful endeavor were then subsequently carried over to other regions and gradually assumed a central role in the US's democracy promotion toolbox.[13]

Today, it is only a small exaggeration to say that US democracy support since the mid-1980s has become almost synonymous with civil society support. Carothers and Ottaway rightly identified this trend as one of the most important changes in US democracy assistance and while they share key assumptions about the important role of civil society in democratic transitions and consolidation, they are nevertheless greatly skeptical about the usefulness of much of the policies and programs developed and implemented in this realm.[14]

A key criticism concerns the convenient theoretical and ideological justifications by government agencies and implementers alike for the almost wholesale shift from costly institutional reform projects to significantly cheaper civil society support – by arguing that civil society is the real key to democratic transition and consolidation, these policymakers and practitioners could avoid addressing the fact that limited or even shrinking budgets made meaningful and long-term institution building all but impossible. Yet another important criticism focuses on the practice of US, as well as most other, democracy promotion policies to concentrate support mostly on a narrow set of civil society organizations, largely consisting of presumably non-partisan, even apolitical, advocacy or civic education NGOs, usually with limited constituencies. This selective engagement created an unnatural disengagement from domestic political processes and left a key part of local civil society

[13] Marina Ottaway, Thomas Carothers, "Funding Virtue: Civil Society Aid and Democracy Promotion", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, 2000

[14] Marina Ottaway, Thomas Carothers, "Funding Virtue: Civil Society Aid and Democracy Promotion", op.cit.

without support it could have greatly benefited from. The broadening of this core target group of civil society actors has only been taking place slowly and very recently.[15]

The last eight years have brought a number of important additions to the policy architecture of US democracy promotion, while at the same time public perceptions, both domestic and global, about the role and utility of democracy promotion have changed in an overwhelmingly negative way. An important addition to US democracy promotion efforts was the introduction of aid conditionality in the form of the Millenium Challange Corporation (MCC). The MCC has been developed to provide financial rewards, in the form of additional available funds, for countries that show progress along a set of benchmarks measuring improvements in democratic governance and economic reform.[16] Yet another hallmark of the Bush presidency has been its greatly increased focus on the Middle East in the context of its democracy promotion agenda. In itself, this could have been a welcome shift in geographic priorities.

Unfortunately, the long shadow of the Iraq invasion, and the subsequent dressing up of the invasion to remove Saddam Hussein as mainly a democratizing mission made any hopes for successful pro-democracy engagement in most countries of the Arab world a mirage. It was partly also a result of a simplified concept aimed at linking the "War on Terror" with democratization, arguing that pushing forcefully for democratic openings in repressive Arab states would reduce the risk that these countries will continue to be breeding grounds for extremism and terrorism. The somewhat uncomfortable fact that the most popular opponents of autocratic regimes in the Arab world are often Islamist movements with dubious democratic credentials was apparently lost on those formulating the US democracy promotion policy in the Middle East. On balance, and despite the soaring rhetoric and increase in funding, the Bush administration has left the US democracy promotion enterprise in a much worse shape than it had found it in.

Democracy aid, while still only small portion of overall government expenditures directed abroad, has steadily grown, from around $700 million in 1999 to around $2 billion in 2007.[17] It is a significant enough amount to deserve attention and invite inquiry as to the methods and channels of its utilization. The trajectory of democracy promotion as a part of US foreign policy is at once a story of ideals and genuine tradition coupled with organic

[15] Ibid
[16] Millennium Challenge Corporation, http://www.mcc.gov/about/index.php
[17] „Meeting our Committment to Democracy and Human Rights: An Analysis of the US FY 2008 Appropriation", Freedom House Special Report, May 2008, http://freedomhouse.org/uploads/special_report/64.pdf

institutional development and that of broken promises, hypocrisy and the abuse of the democracy rhetoric in the pursuit of other strategic interests.

Nevertheless, the United States today remains among the most influential players in the democracy promotion arena, its global reach and material ability being matched only by the European Union, even while its soft powers of persuasion and attraction by example have been significantly diminished during the Bush presidency. Although these soft powers are set to be reinstated to significant degree by the election of Barack Obama, the country's hard power is being stretched by the strain of two wars and the impact of the economic crisis. It remains to be seen if democracy promotion will continue to play a central role in US foreign policy in the current challenging international environment and under a much less ideologically-minded president.

EU Democracy promotion

The European Union's emergence as one of the key players in the field of democracy promotion is without a doubt a highly significant development, not only from a diplomatic perspective, but also in the context of new and successful policy approaches to democracy promotion. The EU's arrival as a major democracy promoter is all the more significant when viewed in conjunction with the decline of US soft power in the wake of the damage done by the Bush administration high-profile, yet aggressive and largely hypocritical, embrace of democracy promotion as a central plank of its foreign policy.

Since the early 1990s, the EU has started introducing democracy and human rights clauses in its agreements with third countries, mainstreaming democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in its cooperation and association policy.[18] Conditionality, a key feature of EU external policies today, was first introduced in the Lomé IV agreement (1990) between the EU and the African, Carribean, and Pacific Group (ACP) countries, which provided preferential trade access to the common market to these countries as well as financial aid through the European Development Fund.

Some of the EU's basic documents – such as the 1992 Maastricht Treaty (Treaty on the European Union) with its references democracy as one of the objectives of the EU's foreign and security policies and as an explicit goal of development cooperation with third countries, and the 2001 Nice Treaty (Treaty Establishing the European Community), which

[18] Tanja A. Börzel, Thomas Risse, "One Size Fits All! EU Policies for the Promotion of Democracy, Human Rights, and the Rule of Law", Prepared for the Workshop on Democracy Promotion, Oct. 4-5, 2004, Center for Development, Democracy and the Rule of Law, Stanford University

explicitly mentions democracy in the context of economic, financial, and technical cooperation with third countries: "Community policy in this area [of economic, financial, and technical cooperation with third countries] shall contribute to the general objective of developing and consolidating democracy and the rule of law, and to the objective of respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms,"[19] – afford a central place to democracy in the EU's relations with third countries.

The Eastern enlargement has been the most ambitious undertaking on the EU's part in democracy promotion, although it must be noted that the enlargement process was never classified by the EU itself as a narrow "democracy promotion" policy in the typical mold implemented around the world. Rather, it was seen as a comprehensive and highly complex process whereby the candidate countries underwent wholesale reforms in their political and economic spheres according to rigorous criteria provided and monitored by the EU in order to reach a well-defined and highly rewarding end-goal: EU membership. Despite these fundamental qualitative differences, however, in aiding and managing the transformation of ten former communist countries into market-oriented liberal democracies through a rigorous system of conditionality-bound positive reinforcement and extensive financial and technical assistance, the EU in fact has developed its own unique form of democracy promotion, which, in the case of these countries, has proven to be highly successful.[20]

To a large extent, the EU's claim to fame today in the field of democracy promotion rests on its enlargement track record, particularly its success of patiently and systematically cultivating democratic consolidation in Central Eastern Europe following the democratic openings of the late 1980s (it remains to be seen if the later enlargement processes focusing on the Western Balkans and Turkey will bring similar success). The lessons of this success were not lost on those looking for a transferable new paradigm into the sphere of more traditional democracy promotion. In fact, the enlargement process – especially its basic feature of combining both positive and negative conditionality and the explicit use of 'European Standards' as benchmarks – today fundamentally informs new policy development toward democratization in the regions of Europe's extended neighborhood and toward countries that are not provided with a path to membership.

[19] Treaty of Nice and Treaty of Maastricht, http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/secretariat_general/nice_treaty/index_en.htm and http://eur-lex.europa.eu/en/treaties/dat/11992M/htm/11992M.html

[20] Amichai Magen, "EU Democracy and Rule of Law Promotion: The Enlargement Strategy and Its Progeny", CDDRL Working Papers, No. 27, 2 November, 2004, Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, Stanford Institute for International Studies

In this sense, the EU today is more comfortable using itself, its own model of democracy, and its highly procedural and technocratic approach to democratization, as an explicit example in third countries than the United States, which is grappling with the global blowback against its perceived arrogance and presumed design to hoist American style democracy onto the world as part of a grand design of imperialistic domination. It can be said that while the US, despite exhortations from the Bush administration to the contrary, has been losing its confidence as a democracy promoter, the EU has been growing in stature, both in its own eyes and in the eyes of those with whom it is engaged. In its immediate neighborhood the EU has attained a status as an "object of gravitational attraction" and is seen in many ways as a benchmark for political and economic development.[21]

Today, the EU has a fully developed set of policies for its "neighborhood" – comprising the whole of continental Europe as well as the Mediterranean basin – in which each individual country belongs to one of three categories: candidate countries (Croatia, FYR of Macedonia, and Turkey); potential candidate countries (the countries of the Western Balkans that were left after the graduation of Croatia and FYRM from the Stabilization and Accession Process); and the countries covered by the European Neighborhood Policy, for whom membership is either explicitly denied (e.g. Morocco) or is put well into the distant future (e.g. Georgia or Moldova). The different policies applied to these countries contain the same normative requirements with regards to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, their difference lies in the intensity of pressures and the generosity of incentives.[22]

The EU's emergence as a foreign policy actor is intimately linked to its internal institutional development during which it has progressively accumulated responsibilities in the foreign policy arena in parallel to those of its member states, at times even supplanting them. In this process, the growth of the Commission's responsibilities and mandate in managing aid and technical assistance received a major boost following the collapse of communism and the initiation of the enlargement process.[23] Parallel to the Commission, the European Parliament (through its role in creating the European Initiative for Democracy and

[21] Michael Emerson, Senem Aydin, Gergana Noutcheva, Nathalie Tocci, Marius Vahl, and Richard Youngs, „The Reluctant Debutante: The EU as a Promoter of Democracy in its Neighborhood", CEPS Working Document, No. 223/July 2005, Centre for European Policy Studies

[22] Enlargement & European Neighborhood Policy websites: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/index_en.htm and http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/index_en.htm

[23] Michael Emerson, Senem Aydin, Gergana Noutcheva, Nathalie Tocci, Marius Vahl, and Richard Youngs, „The Reluctant Debutante: The EU as a Promoter of Democracy in its Neighborhood", op.cit.

Human Rights and its gradually increased oversight mandate over financial matters) and the Council (through its High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy) have also staked out important positions in the emerging institutional architecture that today underpins the EU's various democracy promotion policies.

However, the EU's track record as a foreign policy actor engaged in democracy promotion outside its enlargement framework is mixed, to say the least. This is so despite efforts since the 2004 introduction of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) to create and utilize a policy framework based on the enlargement model and designed to spur political and economic reforms in countries without an accession horizon. In these countries the lack of the membership option – clearly the crown jewel of positive conditionality – seriously limits the EU's leverage over domestic democratization processes. The additional facts that the alternative economic and political incentives included in the ENP are still relatively modest and that the EU is reluctant to trigger negative conditionality clauses vis-à-vis countries that slide back on democracy and human rights clearly points to the hurdles delimiting the use of the enlargement model as a widely applicable democracy promotion tool.

The EU's reluctance to use punitive sanctions for democratic backsliding and the limited availability of funds for positive rewards combine to accord greater importance to direct democracy assistance projects as key instruments in the EU's democracy promotion arsenal in countries outside its circle of prospective members. In recent years, The EU has substantially increased funding for its main instrument for democracy promotion, EIDHR, and as of 2007 its new legal framework entered into force, bringing some significant changes long demanded by recipients and practitioners alike as well as increased funds (€135 million in 2007). Yet despite these positive changes, EIDHR remains a cumbersome and largely one-size-fits-all framework, which imposes excessive administrative burdens on its beneficiaries and, while it does not require host-country consent, it remains politically risk-averse, especially when working in states with repressive regimes.

Apart from EIDHR, it is not easy to clearly classify other types of external aid as falling into the category of democracy promotion. Some consider governance assistance as a subset of democracy promotion assistance, but this claim is problematic in light of the politically circumspect nature of most governance projects in countries where basic political rights and civil liberties are repressed. The strong European emphasis on linking governance and democratization, however, is at the heart of the different approaches to democracy

promotion between the US and the EU. Based on its own experience, the EU perceives governance as the channel through which eventually political reform can also emerge. In general, a move away from the political aspects of democracy promotion towards social issues, such as access to justice or women's rights, has been observed recently in the EU's allocation of democracy assistance funds.[24]

In recent years, some leading observers have questioned the EU's commitment to democracy promotion and have pointed to the increasing primacy of geopolitics and its negative impact on the EU's democracy promotion efforts in third countries. While acknowledging the EU's success in fostering and assisting democratization in places like Central Europe and Latin America, these critics argue that the changed context of democracy promotion – the end of the 'third wave', the increasing pushback from resource-rich autocracies, and the disillusionment with democracy promotion in the wake of the Bush years – presented an unsolvable riddle to EU policymakers whom so far failed to come up with new approaches and enhanced efforts to support democratic change.[25] Youngs and his colleagues convincingly argue that the lack of an effective new strategy is clearly visible in all three pillars of European democracy promotion efforts. *Incentives* are deployed in a haphazard way and have ever more limited impact on the countries they are aimed at, while *sanctions* are only reluctantly and selectively imposed and are often revoked even without the target country fulfilling previous criteria set by the EU for their lifting (as recently evidenced by the case of Uzbekistan, for instance). Finally, the scale of *democracy assistance* remains limited and much of it remains wrapped inside development or governance programs, rather than direct assistance to political actors who are pushing for democratic change in their countries. [26]

Notwithstanding the largely valid criticism of Youngs and his colleagues, it would be hard to ignore that in recent years a number of factors have lead to a more explicit commitment to democracy promotion and a wider variety of distinct approaches and separate initiatives at the European level to support democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in third countries. The end of the Cold War and the reestablishment and consolidation of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe; the success of the EU enlargement processes, creating additional expertise and positive experiences in democratic

[24] Richard Youngs, „What Europe has Been Doing?", Journal of Democracy Volume 19, Number 2, April 2008,
[25] „Is the European Union Supporting Democracy in its Neighborhood?", Richard Youngs (ed), FRIDE, September 2008
[26] Richard Youngs, „Is European Democracy Promotion on the Wane?", CEPS Working Document No. 292/May 2008, Center for European Policy Studies

transitions; the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the continuing challenge to stabilize and democratize its successor states; the political and institutional development of the EU itself; the increasing threat of terrorism and the resulting reflection on the root causes of the conflict – all these factors have been instrumental to the emergence of a distinct democracy promotion discourse within the EU and its distillation into new policy initiatives and funding and assistance instruments. This development in itself is significant and it is no doubt that the new challenges facing democracy promotion around the world can be better tackled with this infrastructure in place.

As the EU tries to adapt to the changed international environment in its democracy promotion strategies, two particular areas will need increased and focused attention. The EU needs to be braver and more determined in establishing and implementing new principles for democracy promotion in countries with very limited freedoms and ruled by repressive regimes. Especially when it comes to Commission assistance, the EU should embrace the idea of more discreet and discretionary funding for local organizations, activists, perhaps even opposition groups, even if it means less transparency and non-partisanship as well as a departure from the classis project funding framework. This is an area where the EU could learn much from the US experience. As a corollary to this, the EU should also explore ways to cooperate closer with political parties and political and party foundations, which can bring a lot to the table and can enrich the EU's current roster of tools to promote democracy in repressive regimes and contribute to consolidation after democratic breakthroughs. In this second area, the practices of Sweden, the UK and the Netherlands could be instrumental in enriching EU policies and democracy support programs.

The EU's emergence in the last fifteen years as one of the main actors in the democracy promotion field is significant and overwhelmingly positive development. It has added diversity to the global effort to promote democratic values and institutions and support indigenous processes of democratization; it has brought new and distinct approaches to democracy promotion, especially through its enlargement process, but also through its expertise in institutionalization and its commitment to multilateralism and preference for soft power and incentives. The EU's presence as a key actor has become all the more important in the wake of the decline of US soft power and the Bush administration's unfortunate marrying of democracy promotion with armed regime change and bullying unilateralism.

The EU's challenge is now to further improve the profile of European democracy promotion, elaborate a core set of coherent policy principles and implement a sustained and clear communication strategy with regards to strategic importance of democracy assistance.

The best of the rest

The US and the EU are of course not the only two actors active in the field of democracy promotion. Today, almost all democratic states have programs of different size and focus that can be classified as democracy promotion. In addition, a number of international and inter-governmental organizations have also developed their own portfolios in democracy promotion.

Among European democracies, the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark are the leading forces of democracy promotion in their foreign policies. In addition to these countries, which do not feel shy about their desire to promote democratic values and institutions and support indigenous democratic movements (even in repressive regimes), a number of other European states, such as Germany, Spain and France are active in the governance and civil society assistance field that in cases is closely linked with democracy assistance. Another important development in recent years has been the emergence of the new EU member states as donors and implementers in democracy and human rights field. Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia have all developed their own assistance programs and while these are still modest in size, they nevertheless symbolize and underline the trend toward greater importance of democracy promotion as a key part of foreign policy strategies.

Among European countries, the UK is the largest donor to governance projects, providing around 500 million Euros annually, mostly in Africa and Asia. In addition to these funds, which are administered through the Department for International Development, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office provides funding to work that falls more clearly under the "democracy promotion" category, including in repressive regimes, such as Belarus, Iran, or Russia. These funds, however, are much smaller than those allocated to governance or development work. The Netherlands is one of the most active and progressive supporter of democracy promotion efforts within its foreign assistance programs, providing to almost 12% of its development cooperation funds to this purpose.[27] German funding for "Democracy, Civil Society, and Public Administration" reached 410 million Euros in 2006,

[27] Richard, Youngs, „Is European Democracy Promotion on the Wane?", op.cit.

making Germany the largest donor in absolute terms. In relative terms, however, it is Sweden that is the most generous supporter of democracy promotion, its assistance reaching 401 million Euros or 24% of its total overseas development assistance.[28] Among the Scandinavian countries, Denmark deserves mention, with its consistent support for democracy assistance, which reached 201 million Euros in 2006 and was supplemented by a dedicated Arab reform initiative program.

Among the new member states that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007, the so-called 'Visegrad Four" (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) have so far developed significant democracy assistance programs. While these programs are still at the early stages of formation, they nevertheless symbolize an important step in the history of democracy promotion: countries that themselves have been beneficiaries of democracy assistance from the West from the mid-1980s today are keen to join the ranks of consolidated democracies assisting democratization around the world.

Apart from states, the number of international and intergovernmental organizations active in the democracy promotion field has also increased in recent years. Within the UN system, the efforts of the UNDP and the UN Democracy Fund, created in 2005 with much support from the Bush administration, have been the leading funding and programmatic frameworks for democracy assistance. The Organization for American States (OAS) adopted the Inter-American Democratic Charter in 2001 and conducts various assistance initiatives through its Office for the Promotion of Democracy. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights is an important player across Eastern Europe and Eurasia, providing technical assistance for governments as well as civil society support. The African Union created a Draft Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance in 2006.

National governments, international and inter-governmental organizations, and supranational entities are today all playing their role in what has become complex web of initiatives, programs, and policies aimed at spurring the spread of democracy on all continents and supporting its development in places where it has recently struck root. While criticism of democracy promotion abounds – either for its imperialistic idealism or for its ineffectiveness – there is no denying that over the last quarter of a century it has become an increasingly important part of foreign policy for many countries as well as a key tenet of international cooperation.

[28] „Survey of European Democracy Promotion", Richard Youngs (ed), FRIDE, 2006,

Today, democracy promotion faces a number of difficult challenges. The wave of indigenous democratic openings that spurred its most recent rise from the early 1980s onwards has clearly ebbed. A number of key countries have in fact shown worrying reversals in democratic performance in recent years. In addition, many autocratic states have drawn strength from rising commodity prices and from the precipitous decline in standing of the United States as the world's foremost democracy promoter and have initiated what has been termed the " pushback against democracy," continuously and often successfully resisting international pressures to democratize and choking their own domestic opponents by depriving them of crucial international support and gradually restricting their domestic freedoms to organize effectively.

The Bush administration's ham-fisted adoption of the terminology of democracy promotion to justify a universally reviled foreign policy agenda seriously weakened what could otherwise be a natural consensus among democratic states and played straight into the hands of those autocrats who are keen to delegitimize democracy promotion as a crude attempt at limiting state sovereignty. In the coming years, the main task of democracy promoters will be to heal their own disagreements and develop a more appealing vision of democracy assistance, one that emphasizes diversity, the primacy of domestic agendas for democratization over one-size-fits-all policies of donor governments, multilateralism instead of aggressive unilateralism, and the values that make democracy a universally appealing notion rather than those that make it seem like a Western concoction unfit for consumption in most countries outside its traditional home.

This is a tall order, but by no means an impossible one and the current challenging international climate might make the revision of outdated assumptions and expired policies easier. The time is right for a new and truly multi-polar strategy of democracy promotion to emerge.